

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

Adapted from "Unshackled" Radio Broadcasts

from the Pacific Garden Mission, Chicago, Illinois

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Chapter Eighteen

Bob Matthews Adrift Meets the Transformer

MY SON BOB has gone and got religion now. It all happened during the last world war when he was in the service. I think he'll get over it. I think it's another of his queer ideas. He always was a hard one to figure out, that Bob. He was a real handful.

Even before his mother and I split up and got the divorce, I could tell he wasn't like other boys. Too sensitive sometimes, too tough at others. That's one reason I left him with her. I figured that a woman could handle a boy like that a lot better than a man could.

But she couldn't do a thing with him. Once in a long while, she wrote and told how he was always complaining, always saying he was lonesome, wanted somebody to whom to talk. They had their worst trouble over his working around too much with his ham radio set. That was all he did. He wasn't much good in school, and it got so his mother couldn't get anything out of him when he did come home. Every day he went straight to his room and played around with that radio set. There were wires and tubes and batteries all over the house.

Now his mother was a timid woman. Naturally, she was scared he'd set the place on fire. She didn't like what the neighbors said, either. Because of Bob's set, they were getting static on their own radios and they didn't like that. His mother didn't want the whole neighborhood against her, and who could blame her? And for a twelve-year-old, Bob was very stubborn. He kept saying that his radio set was all he had, that he wouldn't give it up. Well, it was either the set or the neighbors, and if the boy wouldn't give up the set, there wasn't anything for her to do but tell him to get out, was there?

That's how he happened to come to live with us in Atlantic City. I say "us" because I'd married again by that time, and my wife must have had a premonition about what kind of trouble we were going to have with the boy. She didn't like it at all when she found out she was going to

have my son in the house. But I certainly can't complain about her attitude.

Bob left the bus and came in to the station to look around for me. I saw him first and called out, "Hello, Bob," I can see him yet coming through the terminal, lugging heavy suitcases and some radio batteries.

"Hi, Dad! Gee, I'm glad to see you. Why weren't you out at the bus to meet me when I came in? Oh, boy, Dad, I'm glad" - was the way he began, but I couldn't let him go on, so I said to cut it, and I turned to introduce my wife.

"Bob, this is my wife." It may be that I fumbled my line a little.

Bob choked up as he questioned, "Your wife, Dad?"

I quickly suggested we could talk about that later, but Bob's stepmother was of another mind at the moment. She said, "Yes, I'm his wife - now. I'm no happier to see you than you are to see me, Robert. This wasn't in the bargain when I married your father, and we'll just see who gets pushed around and who doesn't."

I did think those were harsh words to use, but Bob being the problem child he was, I guess it was the best way to handle him. Just show him you wouldn't stand for any nonsense right at the beginning, that was my wife's idea.

From the start, Bob was a show-off. He strutted and swaggered in and out of the house, and no matter how much my wife tried to discipline him, it didn't do any good. The more she tried to straighten him out, the more the ungrateful boy took to staying away from the house.

Playing hooky got to be a habit with him. This didn't look good for us in the neighborhood. After all, we were his parents. But what could we do? My wife took it especially hard. I can remember her saying to her friends over the phone time after time, "Yes, thanks for calling me. I know, he's always getting into trouble like that. Yes, you're sweet. I know, I'll just have to bear up, but it is so humiliating when people take for granted that he's my own son."

After a while, Bob's actions got her down. Finally she told folks, "Don't ask me how my son Bob's doing. He's not my son. No son of mine would ever turn out that way. He's a hoodlum,"

I felt sorry that Bob's teachers kept calling her about his playing hooky. After a while, she had to say, "Don't call here at the house about that boy again. If he plays hooky from school, it's none of my responsibility. Call his father at work."

Bob was getting older. He was only fifteen, but he acted older than that. Even the bartender at the corner told him that he thought he looked old for nineteen, which he said was his age. If Bob wanted to stand around in the barrooms and lie about his age, well, it was just what you'd expect from such a fellow.

Once lying about his age did do him a good turn, but just for a little while. In the end, it was nothing but another dilemma.

They were starting a new radio station in Atlantic City.

Bob heard that they were auditioning for announcers and he tried out. I didn't give him much encouragement, and I have to admit I was amazed when he came home and said he had the job. Of course, he didn't mention how old he was.

I have to hand it to him, he seemed to do pretty well.

Guess all the work he'd done with his ham set helped him. Before long, we used to tune in on Saturday afternoon and hear him announcing the name bands that play in the boardwalk spots. Coast to coast network broadcast, no less!

But lies do catch up with one. Sure enough, they found out at the station how old he was, and of course, they fired him.

After that, Bob was impossible. He talked about being grown up and I know he swore and drank and smoked as much as a fellow of twenty-five. You'd think he was grown up to hear how he carried on about going to school. But he was still only just fifteen. And we were determined to have him keep on at high school.

He took to staying out later than ever. "How's a boy going to keep up with his schoolwork if he stays out till one and two?" my wife would say. She was right, and her idea about bolting the front door from the inside after eleven every night was a good one. "This ought to teach that boy a lesson," she said as she slid the bolt into place the first night.

I couldn't get to sleep right away that night and I was awake when Bob came home about one. I could tell from the way he walked that he hadn't been drinking. I heard him put his key in the lock and try the door. Then he pushed against it hard. There was a long silence and I could hear him going down the porch steps. Of all things, he was whistling.

"That hard-boiled youngster. You can't teach him anything," I said to myself and turned over. I was drifting off to sleep when I heard Clark, the policeman on the beat, call out to Bob, ask him if anything was wrong. Bob answered something about not bothering his father. His voice sounded high and choked. Clark slammed his nightstick on the sidewalk like he was mad and said he'd fix up a cot for Bob.

About a week later my wife found out that the cot that Officer Clark fixed up was at the city jail. But she kept on bolting the door at night, hoping that Bob would come to his senses. "Imagine, your son sleeping at the city jail, like a common thief or a city drunk," she said. "We'll teach him."

But Bob kept coming home late and going down to his cot at the jail. Every so often, I felt it was my duty to give him some fatherly advice. "Bob, let me tell you something," I said one night after supper. "If you don't straighten out and mend your ways and act like a boy your age should act, you're going to end up behind the eight-ball."

He stood staring back at me, like he was waiting for me to say something else, and he muttered

something about not acting like a boy his age because he never had any of the things a boy his age should have. This didn't make any sense to me and there didn't seem to be much more to say, so I picked up the evening paper, and Bob went to his room.

I must admit I was relieved when he told me he wanted to quit high school and join the navy. He had missed so much school anyway that we'd given up all hope of his graduating. I thought the navy would make a man out of him. Get him out there with a lot of real men and he'd snap out of his sullen, shiftless ways.

I gave him some more sound advice before he left.

I felt it was my place to do that. "Watch out for bad women," I told him. I wasn't expecting his answer.

"Women-" he blurted out. "I hate women and why shouldn't I, considering the two I've known?" That - after all his stepmother had done to help him. And his poor timid mother.

I'm not quite sure what happened to Bob right after that. He was in boot training in Newport, Rhode Island, and then we heard he was in the Great Lakes gunnery school.

Next thing I knew he'd got this "religion bug." According to what he has told us over and over, this is how it happened.

He and some of his buddies were on Skid Row in Chicago. He said they were slumming, but knowing what kind of a fellow Bob was, I have my doubts. They were feeling "high" and when they got off a streetcar, a fellow standing on the curb handed Bob a piece of paper.

"Here you are, Buddy. Come on inside," the fellow said. But when Bob inquired and he found out it was a mission, he pushed the paper in his pocket and went on down the street with his pals.

When they went to the next bar, and Bob reached in for a ten-spot to pay for the drinks, he pulled out this piece of paper. Seems it was a religious tract and there was a Scripture verse written on it. Something about reasoning together, though your sins be as scarlet or red like crimson.

Right then, Bob began to feel queer. Of course, he'd been drinking a lot that night and I think it must have had something to do with it. Although they jeered, he left that gang of sailors in the bar and headed back to see the man who had handed him the leaflet. The Pacific Garden Mission, he says the name of the place is, there on Skid Row.

He found the place and went in. And this is the rest of Bob's story.

A lot of soldiers and sailors were telling the story of their lives, how "religion" had changed them. Bob thought it was humbuggery at first, but after the meeting, a fellow came to him, and Bob asked him if he could give him one good reason for believing in GOD.

"Yes, I can: CHRIST," the fellow answered.

That didn't make sense to Bob, and he told the fellow so. But the answer he got then seemed to

indicate that the fellow knew about Bob, his interest in radio and electricity, He went on to say, and I've heard Bob repeat it so many times I can almost say it word for word, "You know electrical power has to go through a transformer before it can enter a small cottage, It's too potent for use in a little building as it comes straight from the dynamo. Well, that's what CHRIST is - the Transformer that makes GOD usable.

"All you've got to do is accept Him as the Son of GOD, and you can have the power of GOD in your life. That's the best reason I know for believing there is a GOD."

Bob says the fellow didn't take it back either, when he told him what a trouble-maker he'd been ever since he was a boy. The fellow went on to explain that Bob wasn't making the change in himself, that JESUS CHRIST was making it for him.

"That did it," Bob says, "I accepted CHRIST right then and there."

I still think that Bob's off on another tangent, that he'll get over this religion idea before long.

But, I must admit it's changed him. No more carousing around from what I can see. He finished high school after he got out of service, too. Knowing how he hated school, that, to me, was amazing. Since then, he's had three years of college, is married to a wonderful girl and is mixed up in radio again. He claims there is something warm and personal in following JESUS CHRIST, a Person, the Living GOD, not just a principle.

You don't suppose that there is something in this Christian life after all?

~ end of chapter 18 ~
